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## Middle West

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## MIDDLE WEST

*He can understand what the 'home-folks' in the small towns of the Middle West are talking about.*

1928 usage of "middle west," *THE CENTURY MAGAZINE*,  
 OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Here, in this heartland, home-folks live and farm the earth, their elbows jutting from fields at angles, their sweat dewing the land as far as the eye can see. Here lives a woman with a bosom so ample, so significant, so loose with connotation her breasts, working entirely on their own, can push a still-baking apple pie right back into that oven, granting that tart fruit some more time to soften. Here, practitioners of soil gaze into the distance, their faces filled in with whiteness, their tongues forming around chitchat that refuses to offend, their mouths rounding off vowels into tidy little bits: *Yah. Yah. Oh, yah did? Yah? Oh. Yah. I s'pose so.* This Midwest will take a long time to drive past, its road signs continuously birthing new states: Ohio Indiana Illinois Michigan Wisconsin Minnesota Iowa Missouri. This land passes, offering itself both as windowed Nowhere and as navigational device, a means of assuring travelers that the long highways on which they wheel themselves are quite rightly blurring them by, heading them, that is, in some other direction.

The Midwest, as murky passing referent, also makes possible the kind of punch lines paired with laugh tracks, what Hollywood calls LFNs ("laughter from nowhere"). Born of the 1950s sitcom, the laugh track consists of the right kind of laughter (nothing spastic, no guffawing) cued at an exact moment for the purposes of aiding the audience in understanding exactly what it is this particular world finds

funny. Each perfect laugh of a perfect duration also, and this proves important, perfects the writer's vision, he who can't help himself, he who will hide his smile when each of his jokes land like pats on the back. And so a writer at *The Boston Globe* takes a moment, for example, on January 18, 2010, to look in on Fond du Lac, Wisconsin:

**WIS. MAN CITED FOR 'ROCKING OUT' TO JOHN DENVER**

POLICE RESPONDING TO A COMPLAINT OF LOUD NOISE HAVE CITED A FOND DU LAC MAN FOR "ROCKING OUT" TO THE MUSIC OF JOHN DENVER. A POLICE (SIC) WHO RESPONDED TO THE MAN'S APARTMENT LAST WEEK COULD HEAR DENVER'S MUSIC THROUGH THE DOOR. [...]

WHEN ASKED WHY HE HAD THE MUSIC SO LOUD, THE MAN SAID HE WAS "ROCKING OUT."

THE REPORTER NEWSPAPER IN FOND DU LAC REPORTED THAT THE 42-YEAR-OLD WAS CITED FOR UNNECESSARY LOUD NOISE. THE TICKET COULD RESULT IN A FINE OF ABOUT \$210.

THE LATE DENVER IS KNOWN FOR SUCH HITS AS "ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH" AND "TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROADS."

"Midwest," the writers write, LFN, rising up between the lines. Laughter cued, coordinates aligned, this is the where and when of a tidiness running deep. Indeed, the Midwestern man need not appear in Boston long for his rocking out to become both a place and a perpetual action; in minds humming with consciousness all the way up and down the eastern seaboard, Fond du Lac Man continuously rocks out to John Denver, continuously earns himself a citation and continuously turns back, with an automated swivel of hips, to begin the process all over again. Geographically speaking, this is the making of an island, a way of mapping out impassable waters, willing a neat world to circle up.



*The Middle West region is oddly named, because the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri, which make it up, are really neither middle nor west.*

1949 usage of "middle west," *OXFORD JUNIOR ENCYCLOPEDIA*,  
*OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

The island surfaced and then stood, seismic and still dripping, the waters of Lake Superior pouring down its pines. On the map one can see it: the wavering outline of a real-looking island, one that would prove little more than pen jaggling mimicked nature onto paper, an island fictitious, made-up, or maybe, just a bit misunderstood. Isle Philippeaux, as it was named, first appeared on a published map in 1744, second in size only to Superior's largest island, the existentially verifiable Isle Royale.

During the century and a half that preceded the island's sudden apparition, French men like Nicollet, Joliet, and Marquette, as well as a number of Jesuits, had shown great pluck and endurance in blundering about this portion of the New World, wandering up and down rivers, giving names to Indian nations, seeking the souls of humans, the skins of animals, and exploring the contours of the rivers and lakes they named, mapped, re-named, and then mapped again. Nicollet, who believed himself in search of the Northwest Passage, that precious portal to the orient, is said to have carried across present-day Wisconsin the clothes he would wear when finally he met the Chinese emperor of Cathay. And yet all that erring had been more or less long ago by 1744 when Jean-Nicolas Bellin made "Map of Canada's Lakes". By contrast, this map, in a cartographic moment we'd recognize as progress, gives an impression of the accuracy we've come to know. These white men having, at long last, stretched their fingers the entire way around all five of the Great Lakes, inscribed these bodies of water with the names by which we now know them, drawing them in sizes and shapes recognizable to the modern eye.

Though the apparition of Isle Philippeaux came suddenly, without explanation, it nevertheless found its grand way into the world, even working itself into the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, which made of it a reference point—by decree it would sit just south of the border dividing British North America from the United States. Reluctant, perhaps, to shirk such a duty, Phillipeaux stood this ground for a long time, almost an entire century, last appearing on a map in 1842.

From air? Out of lake? Finally, who placed the island there? Bellin, that careful maker of maps, can hardly be a point of origin. Like most mapmakers, he got his information from elsewhere and never scoured the lake for land himself, his work taking place instead at a dry desk with clean plume in hand.

Some historians scrutinize Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Lery and his son of the same name, since they likely penned the charts Bellin drew from in making “Map of Canada’s Lakes”. But even this pair, who had, in fact, traveled together in New France, gathered their lake map materials from the sketches and assertions of others. And, besides, even if Gaspard-Joseph Junior—apprenticed to his father at only 12 years of age—did the mischievous deed, why wouldn’t he have given in to a more useful caprice, naming the island after the baker’s teenage daughter, for example, Marie-Therese, she who would surely speak to him now? *Je viens de vous creer une isle!*, he could have called out to her in the street.

Then there’s the fur trader, Louis Denys de La Ronde, a French navy officer who, in 1731, took command of the fur post on Superior’s Madeline Island. La Ronde, apparently, had heard Indians tell of copper on Superior’s islands and worked out a deal for himself: he’d build a boat and explore all these islands in exchange for nine years of monopolizing



the post's trade. If we doubt this character, we'd notice that, as he searched year after year for islands hiding copper deposits, as he moved around that lake, taking what samples he could find, enough islands and inlets and harbors turned up for the purpose of assigning the place names that honored his partners and superiors. If we want to believe in his honest mistake, however, we'd instead remember that he spent much time out there, on his boat, in those vast waters, looking.

It's possible too that the Ojibwe—referred to in the record simply as “the Indians” or “local Indians”—simply needed to find ways of making the burden of possessing native information more rewarding, reciprocal in some way. And so, having known for a long time that some of Lake Superior's islands contained copper, someone told a rapt La Ronde, on the verge of boarding his new vessel, about a ghost woman living on a large island in the middle of those deep waters. This, the informant told La Ronde, was a woman with a bosom so large, so significant, so laden with the copper she formed into medallions, that the clanking layers of her colossal necklace—the size of seven men—actually reflected every beaming ray of the sun, thus draping this mysterious island of treasure in great darkness. Then, maybe, under the clear light of that day, on a beach with buttered popcorn provided for all, they sat to watch him set sail.

Another possibility is that the island decided one day to subsume itself, out of grief, or out of the simple but exquisite irritation at never being found, at a game of hide-and-seek that never showed any mercy.

Another possibility is that the island's still there, swirling away from the scrutiny of satellite images, or permanently ensconced in a rare system of fog so thorough in its efforts to cloud all sense of direction it can actually render itself, not to mention the land over which it hovers, a fiction.

*The trouble is that for most Americans the Mid-West, like other regional identities, is less a place on the map than a state of mind.*

1985 usage of "midwest," *DAILY MAIL*, OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" takes a loose hold of the airwaves, filling the car with its nasal desire for place, this one called West Virginia: "Take me home, country roads/ Take me home, now country roads/ Take me home, now country roads". The northbound highway looks dry and hot, the windows have rolled themselves down, and—be still, traveler heart—appearing before us is a summer day and a state of mind, a moment lending itself well to rounding off fictions, to the finding of false islands.

The air from the window waxes poetic, making a masterpiece of each free tendril of hair and we decide, in that moment of freedom, that it's time to ready our messages. We've worked hard on the words we'd like to leave behind by way of explanation, both for the media who, in a yawning way, might one day attempt to track us, trying to pin this whole story down, as well as for the writers of dictionaries, those abstract persons we love to fret over, praying they'll be meticulous in transcribing our work. We pull in close to fast food chains and gas stations and place shiny acrylic stickers on exterior walls, gas pumps, and bathrooms doors.

WHICH WAY TO THE MIDWEST?

MIDDLING WEST AND LOVING IT.

SEEKING THE CARTOGRAPHIC TRUTH.

The thrill comes, without a doubt, from pulling away in a clamor of haste, the rubber of the tires peeling off the road, the car squawking, the driver unable to suppress a fist pump. Soon after, there's little but the mechanical hum of the car moving forward plus the pregnant quiet of passengers, explorers who inadvertently dampen maps with the grip of excited hands, explorers whose eyes land on the outside in long and sideways looks, minds on the mapped contours of Isle Philippeaux once again.

The ghost of that island has even written us letters. *You are welcome any time*, she writes in perfect script, *don't call beforehand, just drop by, I make apple pies at the drop of a hat!* And so our mouths water as we imagine the impromptu making of pies that will commence when finally we find her, when, with great effort, we pull our wooden canoe up onto the pebbled beach and climb out, stretching through the smiles and yawns that anticipate, already, the island's great gratitude, the host of secrets to be served up to us on coppery plates.

We're aware of our foolishness, aware we might be disappointed, aware that the Midwest, like many of the earth's places, tilts toward under-imagined and overly caricatured, that it might not be a definite place at all, let alone a concrete navigational direction. And yet we go, hoping we might find something, even imagining for a moment what the signage on the island might look like: "Middle West Passage This Way," the largest arrow will point. Or, "Welcome, Friends, to The Magnetic Midwest." Or, underneath that one, "Site of The Original John Denver Wax Museum."

And so we keep the car rolling. And so we go anyway, since we can and because we feel that we must, taking with us the maps that we've made as well as the irreverence needed to wander over them lost. In us we keep a tight hold of the desire to scuff that map's straight lines, to mark them momentarily with the traveling imprints of our left foot wonder and our right foot doubt. In the end, it's the map's captives, islands made but never seen, that keep us moving, middling, as they say, west.